

Every day in Rhode Island some 100 million gallons of human and industrial wastes flow underground into complex sewer-collection systems that empty into 19 major sewage treatment plants. These facilities operate all day, every day, to make polluted water clean, all in accordance with increasing treatment expectations. While much of this occurs without incident and out of public view, every so often something goes wrong. The result can be closed beaches and shellfishing areas, or other public health and environmental hazards.

The RI Department of Environmental Management oversees how municipalities operate and maintain their wastewater infrastructure, as well as the men and women who actually perform the critical work of protecting our waterways from disease-carrying wastes. The US Environmental Protection Agency adds its federal powers and talents to augment existing state efforts. While results so far have been positive, there remains much to be done.

Fortunately for Rhode Island, the vast majority of those employed within its wastewater treatment profession are dedicated to their mission. Some received welcome attention with a second-place finish last October in a nationwide wastewater collection-system repair contest. Others receive awards from the EPA for their dedication to clean water. None of this should come as a surprise. Workers at the state's wastewater treatment facilities, and their families, swim and play in the waters of the Ocean State just like everyone else. Some are shellfishermen. Some are boaters. Some fish for stripers. They know firsthand about the work, time, technology, and money needed to get the job done.

One of challenges facing these professionals — as well as for state and federal regulators and assistance providers — is that so much of the wastewater collection and treatment process takes place underground — out of public view. Absent the attention-grabbing activities of schools and public safety duties, wastewater treatment — as critical as it is for our health and safety — is often a tough sell at budget time.

The results speak for themselves. Inadequate maintenance — or a total absence of it — as well as insufficient staffing, not enough funding, or too many other policy priorities resulted last year alone in just under 100 sewer-system failures, totaling some 5.5 million gallons of untreated or partially treated sewage entering our rivers and bays. Moreover, over the last two years such events resulted in the closure of shellfishing beds for some 40 days. These failures have flooded people's basements, damaged businesses, and, sadly, have given a negative impression of an industry that is typically excellent at what it does.

As a result, DEM is updating its rules for the operation and maintenance of wastewater treatment and collections systems. These rules dictate how owners of such infrastructure must adequately fund and operate their sewage collection and/or treatment systems. In addition, EPA is adding to DEM's enforcement efforts by gathering information, issuing orders, and assessing steep fines where needed. Yet both organizations know that regulatory oversight works best when combined with municipal assistance. For communities seeking to do the right thing, guidance and technical support continues to be made available.

As DEM and EPA continue and expand this joint effort, we are reaching out to local officials, raising awareness about the importance, cost, and value of properly maintaining their community's wastewater infrastructure. While there is little glamour in such discussions — and while the average Rhode Islander is often too busy with life to, for instance, attend local sewer board meetings — we trust that the sentiment among the citizenry is one of support for this basic need of public health and clean waterways.

Certainly there is much else society can choose to do with its financial resources. But protecting ourselves and future generations from the effects of raw sewage must always be a fundamental task of government — and helping local communities understand this message is exactly what DEM and the EPA have joined forces to do.

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